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THE POLITICAL OUTLOOK FOR ITALY DATE: MAR 2002

The creation of Premier Fanfani's "center-left" coalition government supported in parliament by the Nenni Socialists represents a historical realignment in Italian politics. The "experiment," or "opening to the left," as the present government is called, is a first test of the viability of a broader rapprochement between Catholic and Socialist forces which would involve the joint participation of the two parties in some future Italian government.

The Idea of Coalition is Old - The question of a Catholic-Socialist rapprochement, of which the present center-left coalition government of Premier Amintore Fanfani is a first test, is almost as old as modern Italian politics. The "opening to the left," or apertura a sinistra, as the government formula is called, has had its advocates and opponents ever since the two groups organized themselves into national political parties, the Socialists in 1892, the Catholics in 1919. To its advocates the apertura represents the summum bonum, to its opponents, the supreme evil of Italian politics, for such a rapprochement brings together not only two of the most numerous and representative Italian political forces, but also two of the most ideologically antagonistic. Until the post-World War II period, these two forces had been excluded, either through choice or necessity, from the governing process.

Following World War II, the Catholics and the Socialists, together with other forces that had fought in the wartime Italian Resistance movement against the Fascists, collaborated in the reestablishment of a democratic political system and shared for a brief time cabinet posts in the immediate post-war governments. Developing East-West tensions, however, put an end to this

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collaboration when the Italian socialist movement split into a socialist and a social democratic wing: the first firmly aligned with the Soviet-controlled Italian Communist party, the second equally firmly aligned with the pro-Western "center" democratic forces.

As long as the Socialists and the Communists were full-fledged allies in a "unity of action pact" and their policies, both domestic and international, were practically indistinguishable, a Socialist-Catholic rapprochement remained impossible. The moment that the Socialists began moving away from the Communists and regained a measure of their "autonomy," however, hopes for such a coalition were quickly revived.

With the denunciation and the ending of the unity of action pact between the Socialists and the Communists in 1956-57, talks of an 'opening to the left' accompanied each succeeding government crisis. As polemics and differences, both ideological and political, between the Socialists and the Communists increased, and numerous ties between the two parties were gradually loosened or broken, the prospects for an eventual Catholic-Socialist rapprochement continued to increase.

Twice, during the two-month long cabinet crisis that followed the resignation of the Segni government in February, 1960, the leadership of the Christian Democratic (Catholic) Party (DC), attempted an 'opening to the left' which like the present government majority was to take the form of Socialist (PSI) parliamentary support for a "center-left" government consisting of the DC, the Social Democrats (PSDI) and the Republicans (PRI). Twice, the conservative minority within the DC, especially powerful elements within its parliamentary groups who opposed such a government formula, frustrated the majority's plan by threatening to break party discipline and vote against such a government.

The Coalition Implemented - However, on February 4, 1962, Fanfani's all-DC government which had since the summer of 1960 been in power with the support of the Christian Democrats, the PSDI, the PRI, and the PLI, tendered its resignation. After the usual rounds of consultations with the leaders of all political parties, President Giovanni Gronchi asked Fanfani to form another government.

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Armed with his own party's mandate and backing, received in the Party Congress the month before, and encouraged by the desire of the PSDI, PRI, and PSI to move quickly toward a solution of the government crisis, Fanfani began negotiations with the prospective supporters of the future center-left government.

On February 22, Fanfani's coalition government was sworn into office by President Gronchi. Of the 24 cabinet positions, 19 ministries went to the Christian Democrats; 3 to the PSDI; and 2 to the Republicans. With one exception, every member of the new government had held cabinet positions in at least one previous government.

The Christian Democrats retained for themselves, beside the Prime Ministry, the important ministries of Interior, Foreign Affairs, and Defense. The PSDI and the PRI were awarded, as was to be expected, economic and financial ministries as an indication of the new government's intention of implementing a meaningful program of social and economic reforms.

The Program - On March 2, Fanfani presented his new government's program to parliament. The program had been ironed out among the three parties of the coalition and had received the assurance of Socialist parliamentary backing. Some of the planks of the new government's program had also appeared in the programs of previous governments. The most important innovations -- and the hallmark of the center-left government -- were basically three commitments made by Fanfani when he submitted his program to parliament. They included: 1) a commitment to explore the feasibility and desirability of the nationalization of the electric power industries; 2) a commitment to establish the Friuli-Venezia Giulia region; and to introduce in parliament by October 31, 1962 legislation for the enactment of statutes for the establishment of 14 additional regional governments; and 3) the establishment of a National Economic Planning Board to formulate, coordinate, and direct Italian economic development policies.

On March 15, parliament completed the investiture process of the new government. Supporting the government were the three parties of the coalition (the DC, the PSDI, and the PRI), and the PSI which gave its parliamentary support in the form of an abstention.

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In the nine months since its investiture, the new government formula has successfully met several significant challenges and appears to have established an adequate precedent for its continuation and eventual broadening following the 1963 general elections. Although opposition both within and outside the government's parliamentary majority is still formidable, it appears to lack at the present time an alternative solution to the "experiment." Should the life of the present government come to an end before the Spring elections, therefore, it would not prejudice the continuation of the "opening to the left" following the elections.

The Future - The government that will emerge following the 1963 general elections is likely to be similar to the present one with the Nenni Socialist part of the government's parliamentary majority, but not yet participants in the cabinet. It is almost certain, however, that the Socialists will be actual government participants some time during the five-year life of the new parliament which will be elected in 1963.

The longer the "experiment" lasts, the greater the chances of success in its dual and interrelated objectives: a) the implementation of a broad program of social and economic reforms which can undercut Communist appeal, and b) the absorption of the Nenni Socialists into the democratic area which would effectively contribute to the further isolation and electoral weakening of the Italian Communist Party.

The process of "democratization" of the Socialists nevertheless will be long and painful, and a variety of factors, both domestic and international, will contribute to its acceleration or its retardation. The emergence of a Socialist Party either as a reliable and trustworthy partner in a government coalition, or as a democratic loyal opposition of the left, will certainly require the utmost skill, patience, and perseverance of all the participants and supporters of the "opening to the left."

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